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ABSTRACT

This paper employs a phenomenological theory of human communication to re-examine several thematic concerns which were addressed in an article by Paul Watzlawick (1977) on the pathologies of "perfectionism"--an article which was, principally, an indictment of Marxism as a pathological, utopian (or perfectionist) manner of thinking. Given that Watzlawick's critique of Marxism is very much in keeping with the postmodernist critique of traditional social theory, it serves to frame this paper's central line of inquiry: what are the "consequences" and/or pragmatics of humane, critical reflection? Since Watzlawick's critique demands a rejection of the "all or nothing Aristotelian dichotomies," the paper explores its problematic issue from the standpoint of two non-Aristotelian methodologies: general semantics and existential phenomenology. The paper concludes with reflections on the situation of the postmodern thinker (as a professional academic) and a reconsideration of the relationship of theory and praxis. (Twenty-one references are attached.)
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The Pragmatics of Perfection: General Semantics, Existential Phenomenology, and the Consequences of Critical Refelection

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ABSTRACT

This paper employs a phenomenological theory of human communication to re-examine several thematic concerns which were addressed in an article by Paul Watzlawick (1977) on the pathologies of "perfectionism"—an article which was, principally, an indictment of Marxism as a pathological, utopian (or perfectionist) manner of thinking. Given that his critique of Marxism is very much in keeping with the postmodernist critique of traditional social theory, it serves to frame this paper's central line of inquiry: what, absent the critical dialectics of (modernist) Marxism, are the 'consequences' and/or pragmatics of humane, critical reflection? Since Watzlawick's critique demands a rejection of the "all or nothing Aristotelian dichotomies," the paper explores its problematic from the standpoint of two non-Aristotelian methodologies: general semantics and existential phenomenology. The paper concludes with reflections on the situation of the postmodern thinker (as a professional academic) and a reconsideration of the relationship of theory and praxis.

Key words:

perfectionism
utopianism
general semantics
existential phenomenology
pragmatics/pragmatism
analogical/digital relationships
map-territory distinction
problem of theory and praxis
postmodernism

I. Introduction: On the problem of perfection and idealism

A little over a decade ago in an article titled "The Pathologies of Perfectionism,"[1] Paul Watzlawick sketched a broad critique of the discourse and psychology of ideological fanaticism. His critique, arising out of his extensive work in existential communication theory and paradoxical problems, draws into focus some useful existential foundations for understanding the 'language' bases of fanatical and utopian belief. In this essay, he equates the fanatic's belief system with the pursuit of "perfection" and, in essence, argues that the fanatic's obsession is perpetual because the fanatic commits a basic semantic/semiotic experience error: the realm of the perfect, the utopian, is not a realm appropriate for thinking because it is not a realm possible for being. Hence, the perfectionist attempts to actualize the ideal, and does so at the expense of the real (by way of ongoing critique and negation). From an existential standpoint, the "ought" or "should be" becomes separated from the "is," thus detaching the perfectionist from an authentic encounter with the infinite potential and relational structure of the lived, process-world.

The immediate conclusion to be drawn from Watzlawick's indictment of perfectionism is that the ostensible 'humanism' of a philosophical or ideological system, like Marx's utopian collectivism, conceals a monumental terror,[2] and that this terror has been repeatedly actualized in this century through the visions of Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot (to name a few). Yet even more compelling than his indictment of naive

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[1]See Watzlawick (1977, pp. 12-18). The entire issue of *Etc.* was devoted to the problems of fanatical and utopian belief systems as viewed from the perspectives of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and general semantics.

[2]For a fuller treatment of these issues, especially the postmodernist turn from 'traditional' Marxism (as a doctrine), see Descombes (1980). For an interesting perspective on the "problem" of Marxism (for philosophy) prior to the events of May 1968, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1969).

Marxism is the sequence of questions sparked off by this line of thinking: What implications might this have for the tradition of philosophical thinking committed to humanity's emancipation? Inasmuch as it pursues a presently nonexisting freedom, does it not therefore pursue an 'other' world—an ideal, a 'perfected' humanity? If so, what role should philosophy then occupy, or rather, what is left for philosophy to do? Should thinking cease criticism for fear of "slippage" into the terrors of utopianism? Should 'worldly' thought allow itself to devolve into personal therapy? Should philosophy then give up on emancipation and concern itself with little projects, analytical exercises—what Sören Kierkegaard described as "dog tricks?"[3] And, again on this same level of reflection, is twentieth century critical thought and its underlying project of emancipation silently headed for its own version of positivism's fatal embarrassment?—such that by the end of the cycle, the scorecard might well read: God is dead, metaphysics is dead, Marx is dead, emancipation is dead... philosophy is dead.

Some heady questions, these, clearly overdrawn and, admittedly, *well outside* the scope of Watzlawick's central argument. Nevertheless, the issue remains: can thinking escape the "pathology of perfectionism?" The seemingly insurmountable dialectics of humanism and terror, blind irrelevance vs. visionary zeal, passivity and patience vs. urgency and action come to the surface as subtexts in Watzlawick's essay, and serve as an open-ended description of political psychology in a frightening and cathartic era of global development. During a period prefaced by the possibility of apocalypse, instrumental and developmental change seem the 'fiddlings' of a latter-day Nero, impatience hastens reflection, and inaction seems criminal.

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[3]This Kierkegaardian turn of phrase was cited by Rorty (1984, p. 11).

The 'middle-ground' of philosophy—that the disciplined process of critical reflection becomes itself a 'wholesome' way of life for the thinker, appears to be swallowed up by the perceived exigencies of the moment. During such a period, essence precedes existence and theory precedes praxis, not out of ontological necessity but because it would seem 'irresponsible' for consciousness and reflection to proceed in any other manner. Anything other would seem ad hoc, incoherent, uncohesive, ramshackle, and makeshift.[4]

In the decade that has passed since the publication of Watzlawick's article, the enterprise of critical reflection has continued apparently undiscouraged by the so-called tyranny of perfectionism (and probably not even aware of it). The state of affairs commanding the attention of the critic is no less urgent, yet the rhetoric of reflection—of philosophy as radical thought—seems to have steered clear of an ideological dead-end. At the time, Watzlawick was well aware of the turn taken in philosophy away from objectivism and categorical reason. He observed (1977, p. 17-18) that "the social sciences will have to take note of the fact that the quiet revolution of the philosophy of science of our century has left behind the Aristotelian dichotomies and with them the unresolvable paradoxes of an all-or-nothing view of reality." While his concluding observation is of obvious significance, it only partially accounts for the reinvigoration of critical reflection in the twilight of emancipation. In addition to understanding that a pursuit of humanity's perfection is an Aristotelian, all-or-nothing, categorical, utopian

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[4]For an interesting example of the problem of theory and praxis with respect to the legal movement known as "critical legal studies," see Fish (1987, pp. 1773-1800). It is in this essay that Fish introduces the reader to the problems inherent in the critical legal studies' approach to praxis. "Ad hoc, makeshift, incoherent," etc., portray the reactions of this new breed of legal scholars to case law which does *not* advance theory prior to judgement in specific cases.

mistake, it is likewise significant that critical reflection become conscious of its limits—that it become aware of the processes it cannot improve and the realms to which it thus does not belong.

In short, the purpose of this essay is to investigate these limits, to consider the relations of theory and praxis (essence and existence) in terms consistent with Watzlawick's critique without abandoning the notion of personal responsibility and plunging into escapist therapy or ideological selfism. The general position I will take is that consciousness is a reflective activity, and as an activity it is not productively guided by awareness or adherence to preexisting categories or structures of thought (or to paraphrase an old saying, talking about praxis is to praxis what talking about passion is to passion). A zeal for action, irrespective of the exigency, thus need not presuppose a zeal for perfect action such that essence would precede existence and theory would design praxis. It is in the realm of praxis where humanity realizes its freedom simultaneously as choice and as action. So the source of emancipation lies not in the philosopher's dream of a perfect world but in the conscious realm of meaningful action.

II. General semantics and existential phenomenology: A study of consciousness, analogs, maps, and theory

In examining the problem of theory and praxis, I intend to investigate the phenomena of thinking and reflection in light of what Watzlawick terms the "quiet revolution of the philosophy of science of our century." There are numerous ways of narrowing this field, any number or combination of which might satisfactorily bring these issues into focus. However, since my purpose here concerns the relationship of 'theory' to the

reflective activity of consciousness and, as well, the forsaken "Aristotelian dichotomies and... unresolvable paradoxes of an all-or-nothing view of reality," I will investigate the problem from the standpoint of two (self-proclaimed) "non-Aristotelian" systems which seem highly relevant to the problem as framed: general semantics and existential phenomenology. General semantics offers a non-Aristotelian referential system which views experience as a process of abstraction shaped by the structures of language. Existential phenomenology offers a philosophical system which is capable of functioning simultaneously (and co-extensively) as both heuristic and critique of the person (as an embodiment) and his or her experience of the life-world. Both are extremely helpful in the context of the general position I am taking inasmuch as they are directly and thematically concerned with the problematic of language in the experience and formation of the person as consciousness, system, and action.

The intersection of general semantics and existential phenomenology can be seen in somewhat sharper resolution when one examines their mutual concern (and compatibility of approach) with respect to the two following issues: the discovery of analogical relations, and consciousness of the 'power' language exercises in the transformation of experience.

The discovery of analogical relations as an issue in the study of experience is an attempt to reground the process and phenomenon of perception through an awakened consciousness of hidden (i.e., absent, undisclosed, subtextual) or naively assumed structures and patterns. My use of the term 'analogical' extends from the information ecology of Gregory Bateson (1979) the communicative pragmatics (and existential therapy) of Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson (1967) and the

semiotic communicology of Richard L. Lanigan (1988). The issue for all of these writers involves the 'proper' balance of *analogical* modes of relationship with *digital* modes of relationship in the consciousness and communication of experience, especially given the apparent historical and epistemic priority of the digital.

A fuller understanding of what is meant by the discovery of analogical relations can be obtained through an examination of the following quote from the 19th Century poet, philosopher, and literary theorist J. C. Friedrich von Schiller (1910):

> So long as the human being, in his first physical condition merely approaches the world passively, merely senses, then he is still fully one with it, and even, since he himself is merely world, there is for him as yet no world. Only when he, in his aesthetic attitude, places or views the world as outside himself, does his personality sever itself from the world, and does a world appear to him, since he has ceased to constitute one with it.[5]

Briefly, what I take from Schiller's observation is that the person's *differentiation* of the world (and of its parts), and of himself from the world, is an originary source of naive 'objectivity.' This differentiation, however, is only a consciousness of relations, *never a separation;* so, consequently, 'objectivity,' or '*out-there* ness,' does not actually occur. Its 'occurrence' to consciousness is thus only an illusion.

Schiller's observation thus provides an effective point of departure to discuss the concept of the embodiment of temporal and spatial relations as analog and digital modes of relationship. The person in his or her primordial and unspeakable mode of being co-constitutes the world: his or

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[5]See Schiller, (1910, 25th letter, p. 296). The quotation included in this essay follows a slightly different translation; it is cited by Strauss (1980).

her body is united and engaged with it as a body among bodies among matter. As the person grows or evolves into advancing states of consciousness and sophistication, the person then becomes conscious of 'person-ness' or 'personality'—what Schiller describes as "his aesthetic attitude." The personality then differentiates the world from itself, and hence allows itself a stance from which to view the world's constitution as an independent phenomenon. As an outgrowth of these evolving processes and advancing degrees of sophistication, communication (as expression) becomes possible as a declaration of difference. In other words, the person expresses him- or herself ('speaking out' or a 'speaking of outness') by taking notice of 'objects' (and object relations) as objects of the world he or she has uniquely come to possess. Expressive communication, or the sharing of information about these objects describes what is known as the *digital* mode of communication. The unspoken and unspeakable co-constitution of the body in its complex relations with these objects, and which serves as the grounding of digital expression, is known as the *analogical* mode of communication.

The general semantics of Alfred Korzybski (1958) is concerned with the creative discovery and disclosure of the communicative analog. Given that the structure of the digital mode is primarily verbal, and that the structure of the analog is almost exclusively non-verbal,[6] Korzybski sought to base a logic of awareness, a consciousness of naive 'objectification,' upon the primacy of the 'unspeakable' (i.e., non-verbal and analogical) levels of

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[6]While I am willing to defend this distinction in the context of the limited purposes in which I am using it here (that is, the sense in which 'digital' most likely corresponds with a sedimented, social habit of language), I am well aware that the distinction between analog and digital is not strictly one of 'verbal' vis a vis 'non-verbal'. The verbal/non-verbal distinction *does*, however, provide a clear conceptual backdrop for the relationship of general semantics to Lanigan's communicology and Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson's pragmatics.

relationship. Korzybski saw the Aristotelian, Newtonian, and Euclidian traditions of thinking as reifications of the false separation of the naive objectifying consciousness of a world 'out there.' He did not deny the existence of an outer, extensional world, but this was for him not a major issue. What he saw as important was the notion that the facticity of the outer, extensional world – in other words, its sensibility– was not compatible in structure with its reflection in the semantic/language formations of verbal expression. He saw the Aristotelian tradition, in particular, as guilty of stressing the primacy of the verbal over the non-verbal. In the conventions and functions of language, he noted, there is an unfortunate possibility of construction wherein objects can be identified with the words or symbols used to represent them. As such, for the naive speaker, the word becomes the thing; the map becomes the territory.

Korzybski's principle, according to Bateson (1979, p. 32), "reminds us in a general way that when we think of coconuts or pigs, there are no coconuts or pigs in the brain." While this insight is important, there is even more to the principle than an awareness of what the conscious person does not do in the reflecting processes of language, as Bateson concludes (p. 32) "Korzybski's statement asserts that in all thought or perception or communication about perception, there is a transformation, a coding, between the report and the thing reported, the *ding an sich.*" The problem of identification is thus a transformation in the course of which an object relationship is denoted by way of the categorical equation or linkage properties of the verb "to be" (i.e., "is-ness"). The structure which follows from the initial transformation becomes the basis of automatic or habitual response (i.e., semantic reaction, if the linkage closes the perceiver off from further investigation into the nature of relations.

Existential phenomenology shares Korzybski's interest in opening up the person to the infinite potential and relational structure of the life world as an ongoing process.[7] Again, consistent with Schiller's language, the person's consciousness of the world as a 'speaking-out' of his or her personality or "aesthetic attitude" implies an experiential absence, a closure of awareness from the wholeness of his or her embodied, analogic-relational suspension in and with the world. Whereas for Korzybski's general semantics, consciousness of experience becomes one and the same with consciousness of abstracting, for existential phenomenologists consciousness of experience is openness to the world. Another way of saying this is to suggest that the person's openness to the world is a motile, intentional act of the body. A person's thrownness or suspension in the world is therefore not merely a description of static body-object relationship, but a description of substantive, sensible, and meaningful embodiment, an incorporation and incarnation of the world as processes, actions, meanings, and events. For the existential phenomenologist, understanding of expressed relationships is narrowly constrained and consciousness (of experience) is 'lost' if the activity of reflection stems from an assertion of the primacy of objective meaning.

The general semanticist seeks to rediscover the analogical relations of the person to the empirical world through an awareness of how reality is abstracted through the structures of language. Problems of allness,

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[7]That the project of existential phenomenology was, in large part, opening the person up to the potential of the life world is a point that is not regularly debated and is quite evident in the work of such principal figures as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Schutz, Gadamer, and Jaspers – and, in a certain sense almost prefigures the emancipatory interests of the German Critical Theory school. For a specific treatment of existential phenomenology sharing 'map/territory' and 'analog/digital' problematics comparable with those addressed in this essay, see Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968, pp. 124-27); Valle and Eckartsberg (1981), and Moss and Keen (1981, pp. 107-120).

elementalism, additivity, multiordinality, and self-reflexiveness are framed as failures of the person as a conditioned semantic reactor to delay responses to stimuli and recover consciousness of his her processes and levels of abstraction. Existential phenomenology attempts to rediscover the analog by way of a rigorous cycle of description, reduction, and interpretation. On an ostensible level, the differences between these two systems of investigation would seem profound: general semantics grew out of Korzybski's behavioristic, positivistic, and scientistic leanings (see Thayer 1970, pp. vii-xviii), whereas existential phenomenology arose as a critique of positivism, scientism, and behaviorism. Yet, although the systems are quite different in tradition and terminology, and are clearly non-interchangeable with respect to epistemology and rigor, there is an axiological compatibility, a consonance of purpose, wherein one can begin to see a way in which general semantics concepts can be appended to the project of existential phenomenology, and conversely.

Although an exhaustive interrogation of the shared conventions of general semantics and existential phenomenology would require a much more ambitious project than this essay permits, it is possible to view, for example, the perpetual circularity of the structural differential as an operational description of a phenomenological hermeneutic circle—as a visual aid, as it were, for the method of description, reduction, and interpretation. As well, the bracket (or phenomenological *epochē*), while arguably more rigorous, serves a function quite similar to the general semantics principle of delayed or conditional responses. In short, the purpose here is, of course, not to assert the congruence of the two systems, but to suggest that the logic and rationale of the two systems imply complementary patterns and purposes.

The thematic similarity of general semantics and existential phenomenology comes into fuller view when we examine the second general point of intersection, which addresses the importance of a person's consciousness of the power which language exercises in the transformation of experience.

The background for this position has been, to some degree, developed in the foregoing analysis concerning the need of consciousness to recover hidden analog relations in order to evolve as a '*knowing* consciousness.' And, along these same lines, both Korzybski and the phenomenological tradition (starting with Husserl) are concerned with the interrogation and reformulation of our legacy of thought, which has for us become 'habit.' The habits of thought beget structures of experience and shapes of consciousness before the blinking of an eye. For this reason, the philosopher's claim that existence precedes essence and the atheist's proclamation that man created god fall upon the sensibilities of unreflected consciousness as a sort of counterintuitive blaspheme (although this latter claim may be less a blaspheme for some than for others, language having shaped for them, possibly, 'habits' of cynicism and doubt). The sedimented grammar—or "rationality" and "order" according to Foucault (1970,1972)—of the social world exists for consciousness as a historical creation and reification, arising out of a context of historical dialectic wherein the negation of ideology is brought about by the positioning of yet another ideology—a historical self-reflexiveness of ideologies consistent with Korzybski's notion of the self-reflexiveness of language.

Existential phenomenology and general semantics are both therefore engaged with the problem of language habits as a problem of metaphysics. Yet they are not so much interested in taking on the metaphysical tradition

per se as they are interested in a sort of deconstruction of the metaphysics of consciousness and experience. For Korzybski (pp. 197, 404), the problem rested in the Aristotelian tradition (i.e., the "laws of thought") embedding categorical and doctrinal rationality into the grammar of language. This doctrinal function (which Korzybski saw as a metaphysics of the 'rational,' Aristotelian tradition), in combination with Korzybski's critique of traditional metaphysics[8] as entailing the person in his or her immediate cultural situation by way of learned, or conditioned, habits (which are simultaneously studded over with ideologies or "creeds" [see Korzybski, p. 371]), suggests an unsane determinism for naive consciousness, or the "untrained semantic reactor (see Korzybski, pp. 19-31)." For existential phenomenology the problem is quite similar, although the terminology and targets are somewhat different. The phenomenologist sees that the unreflected consciousness of the naive person takes its separateness from the social world as a point of fact. This detachment of the ego becomes a strange and paradoxical theme of action for the naive consciousness, and it seeks its guidance (in a sense, its 'in-formation') in the sedimented institutions and practices of the social order. Naive and unreflected, the alienated ego is condemned to a "homeless" existence as a reification of the dominant presuppositions of the day.

So, the general semanticist is concerned with the tragedy of unsane determinism; the existential phenomenologist with the tragedy of the unfree. Although the language and traditions do differ, both are, in one way

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[8]It is worth noting that Korzybski's critique of metaphysics is not only consistent with the existential phenomenological critique of philosophy and metaphysics put forth by Heidegger, but is quite consistent with the post-modernist, Nietzschean, critique of rationality put forth by Foucault and Derrida. The difference, of course, lies in the fact that Korzybski sustained a strong faith in the principles of modern, scientific reason, while both phenomenology and post-modernism fundamentally reject the normalizing, 'white mythology' of modern science and rationality.

or another, concerned with humanity's emancipation. Both are concerned with the imprisoning limits set by a language system which "tells us" what things mean, which cuts us off from the hidden, the absent, the invisible, the other, and thus our selves.

This second intersecting point of general semantics and existential phenomenology is not so much a point to be found on a map, but the map itself. Korzybski's metaphor of the map, the map-maker, the map-reader, and the territory (Korzybski 1958, pp. 17, 58, 247, 498) provides a useful set of images for depicting the various levels, or orders, of conscious activity. For most intelligent individuals, the idea of confusing these levels seems silly. A thought about a pig or a coconut is not the same as a picture of a pig or a coconut, which is not the same as the actual pig or the actual coconut. We know this, but then again this is only the bare surface level of the metaphor.

A map is drawn and used, initially, because the actual territory is strange to us. We have no experience of 'the territory' because the territory is not available to us all of a piece; 'it' is not available to us for experience. In our consciousness of the coconut, we do not experience 'the coconut' but a representation of the coconut, because, frankly, there's too much coconut 'there' for experience. The general semantics position is that the coconut is infinite. Its composition and structure are constantly changing. So, even if I systematically and rigorously explore the actual coconut, the coconut I explored is now, suddenly, a different coconut. The existential phenomenological response is not to deny the general semantics position, but to add that my rigorous exploration of the coconut is also a non-exploration of the coconut's 'otherness': my choice of what to look for is

also a rejection, a negation or making-absent, of the as yet undisclosed coconut-ness.

As a result, the attention of consciousness is directed to only a sign, a representation, of the thing. For Korzybski, the sign is a "map"; it is his concern that the person not confuse the sign with the thing. The phenomenologist shares this concern and further adds that the sign is, all at once, intertwined in a network of other signs. Consciousness of this existential network of signs and sign relationships becomes our point of entry into the ubiquity of language as a semiotic system—in other words, a system of codes and transformations combining analogical with digital, syntagmatic with paradigmatic, verbal with non-verbal, system with structure. For general semantics as well as phenomenology, there is a methodological awareness that a sign, or map, of the thing is all that is apprehended in the "uptake" of perception. Although, on first blush, this might seem a metaphysical cul-de-sac, it becomes instead a point of emphasis: we must therefore attempt to sustain consciousness of the limits of our perception.

If not, the map, or sign, becomes the content of our experience and a whole host of perceptual problems ensue. Naturally, these problems become magnified when we awaken to the reality that our problems are not just with things, but with other persons, activities, processes, events, commitments, and so on. When, for instance, we experience a social event—complex, yet at the same time ordinary—such as a professional meeting or a dinner party, we are apprehending only a sign, a map, of the event. Of course, the sign is not just *a* sign, but an aggregate[9] of many signs,

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[9]Compare Korzybski's analysis of the theory of aggregates, pp. 280-87 with Watzlawick, Weakland, Fisch (1974, pp. 1-13). Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, for purposes of resolving

all interconnected and contingent. Yet when we pass through the event, punctuate it, and reflect back on it, we are left with some dominant impressions, a sense of what happened, and we are also left with a dark unquestioned manifold of traces—things we perceive did not happen, things we ignored, feelings we suppressed. This aggregate (or sign synthesis) may be remembered as a vague or ambiguous recollection, something to be reflected, thought about, investigated; and then again it may not be. After all, the sign interaction or meta-map of the event makes up our perceptual constitution of the event. If we take the map as our experience, we are taking something we can easily refer back to, and is something which is uniquely ours. Thus, we can elect to store it away as is; no questions asked.

The map becomes a metaphor for our experience. Or, in a different sense, we view or think of our experience in terms of the map. When the metaphor is active for us, we are aware of its limits and function. It serves an instrumental mnemonic necessity, configuring the ground of ambiguous experience; moreover, it can act as a reminder of our own semiotic contingency, as an other among selves in the event at large. When the metaphor becomes dead, it covers over the complexity of our being-in-the-world, turning consciousness away from experience and onto the horizon of the 'next' event—already figured, already structured; in a sense, already experienced.

This hypostatized map of experience becomes, then, a frame or point of reference for other experiences. It becomes a digit, a self-contained set which can then be compared or contrasted to another set or

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psychological and relational problems, offer their own metaphysics of experience in the form of a mathematical postulate known as the "theory of groups." Korzybski, a classically trained mathematician, similarly conceptualized the orders of experience (or "levels of abstraction") in expressly mathematical terms.

its absence, which is also a set (see Lanigan 1988, pp. 14-17). This referencing of one punctuated experience set in terms of another describes, in a sense, what Korzybski (pp. 58, 323) critiques as the self-reflexive function of language. One abstraction of experience informs another, leading us to abstract abstractions; we make maps of maps, signs of signs, and we are then no longer in conscious contact with the sense or intelligibility of our world. Once these self-contained aggregates of abstracted reality interact in a confusion of content-less, mirrored self reflection, the 'experience set'—expressed earlier in this essay as a lived embodiment of spatial-temporal relations—becomes a mind-set, an ideology.

The mind-set of the unquestioning person becomes a mind-set of habit. It is a mind-set of the routinely visible. The map it follows, therefore, is formed and configured from the signs of the sedimented, institutional, historically-situated social order. It is a cognitive map: it tells us how our mind should work and how we should act. As a mind-set, it is the existential phenomenon of essence preceding existence. It is the experiential origin of theory's domination of praxis. This is a position which has been taken by existential psychologist Rolf von Eckartsberg (1981). He suggests that the map-territory relationship corresponds to the relationship of theory to praxis—that theories can be seen as maps of human life, as he notes (p. 26): "For the believer, the dweller in a theory, a theory is a cognitive temple. Each theory constitutes a 'cognitive optics' for the study of human events." The notion of theory as map adds a new dimension to the critique of Aristotelian rationality: the problem of predictability. When the map becomes a habitual guide for action, it no longer functions as a context for sanity and freedom. It takes away choice. The map-making occurred for the person, originally, as an outgrowth of creative action, and it occurred in

an active, actual realm. When the map becomes theory, it is abstracted out of the actual, it is hypostatized, and it is drawn into the 'dead' realm of the ideal.

This position is not taken to condemn 'theory' per se, but to place the rational, modernist habits of theoretical discourse in their 'proper' context of praxis (where praxis is viewed, ontologically, as a process of embodiment). Its purpose is to draw into sharper focus the problematical relation of theory to praxis. My intention was to base a critique of theory as theoretical idealism, or perfection, on an ontological study of consciousness and experience employing thematic isomorphisms of general semantics and existential phenomenology. In addition to the shared axiological orientations of these two systems, however, there is also a shared set of problems. These problems will be examined in the next section.

III. Toward a new foundation for the pragmatics of critical reflection

The practice of the philosopher, as viewed by the casual observer, often seems veiled in mysticism. The consequences of rigorous and reflective critique, of interpretation, of creative synthesis, are not generally visible to the broader social world. His or her work is, characteristically, embedded in the cloistered environs of a specialized interpretive community. To be more specific: the philosopher in our era is an academician. His or her work, as lectures, writing, and instruction, is professional work. Yet, in a strange way it is professionally alienated from the sphere of commerce which it is thematically intended to address. The philosopher's practice is an entity of the academic world. It is a world

where teaching and research blend in an effort to encounter and express knowledge, but it is likewise a world of authority, discipline, and hierarchy.

As an alienated action, an action without feeling or contingency of consequence, this practice tends toward the ambiguity of theory. It tends to be self-reflexive: a critique of critiques, a thinking about thought. It dwells in the cartography of metaphysics, its action is dialectical (and, hence, is as much negative as positive), its language is ideal, and it contemplates perfection.

At the beginning of this essay, I examined a broad set of issues touched off in an article written by Paul Watzlawick in which he critiques the detachment of idealist thinking. In many ways the issues stimulated by his central argument frame a critique of critical reflection in the absence of consequences: a reflection of what historically and existentially occurs when the philosopher gets lost in the map. As both his and my reasoning imply, the practice of critical reflection is not a process of digital communication. It entails map-reading and map-making for the purposes of going somewhere. The critique finds and embodies life in the creative activity of interrogating the dead metaphors and bloodless metaphysics of inherited philosophical traditions.

The question of relevance (namely, the question of whether the critic has anything much to contribute to the world around him or her) is a question which has dogged the enterprise of philosophy for longer than philosophers would care to admit. Generally speaking, the response has been a sort of circumvention: those who read and study philosophy do it because they want to; those who don't have simply not discovered a purpose or desire for it. It is sort of like running for public office or learning to tap dance: it's not easy, it's not for everybody, and a person ought to have

something in mind for it before he or she begins. This circumvention works if the questioner is satisfied with such tightly circumscribed pragmatics, i.e., the consequence of philosophy lies in waiting for those who desire it. It admits that those who seek it are self-selected—that it is, thus, for the individual in the development and emancipation of his or her consciousness.

The question of relevance is a question that has been asked of both general semantics and phenomenology.[10] It is a question whose answer, in this case, cannot readily be found in the systems or their operation. Both are structured on an emancipatory principle, but the emancipation is, again, for the self-selected individual. Originally, Korzybski's work was intended to influence the entire system of education throughout the Western world. Korzybski after all was not, strictly speaking, a philosopher and his ideas were not limited in their consequence by the conventions of institutional reason. Although his work has had more of an 'influence' in the broader social world than a number of other philosophical systems, his work is now largely dismissed as simplistic and irrelevant. To the extent it is explored at all, it is largely an academic phenomenon—as is very much the case with phenomenology (which is exclusively an academic phenomenon).

It has become a habit of twentieth century thinkers to talk to themselves: thinkers/theorizers producing theory for the sake of theory, in the hope that theorizing will somehow improve thought. It is the position of a number of thinkers who call themselves neo-pragmatists (most notably, Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish) that this phenomenon can be characterized as "theoretical professionalism," and that it performs a disservice to the

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[10]For a critical perspective on the relevance of general semantics, see Anatol Rapoport (1970, pp. 163-188). For a critical (although even-handed) perspective on the phenomenological tradition, see Richard Rorty (1982).

practice of criticism and interpretation. As Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels argue (1985, p. 11-13):

> The theoretical impulse, as we have described it, always involves the attempt to separate things that should not be separated... Our point has been that the separated terms are in fact inseparable. It is tempting to end by saying that theory and practice, too, are inseparable. But this would be a mistake. Not because theory and practice (unlike the other terms) really are separate but because theory is nothing else but the attempt to escape practice... theory is not just another name for practice. It is the name for all the ways people have tried to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without. Our position has been that no one can reach a position outside practice, that theorists should stop trying, and that the theoretical enterprise should therefore come to an end.

What Knapp and Michaels are arguing is that 'theory' has become a problem structurally parallel, in many respects, to the problem/pathology of perfectionism which Watzlawick identified in the naive humanism of Marxist utopianism. It is the search for 'consequences' outside the realm of praxis. It is an encounter with infinite regress. It is a confusion of map with territory, sign with signifier—with signified.

Naive, modernist Marxism necessarily entails a tragic absurdity not because of the historical fact that Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, et al, were inhumane, but because its formulation is predicated on the presupposition of a world outside itself. It is an abstracted theory which is designed to precede action. Naive Marxism is not a whole philosophical system. It is instead a self-contained set of absolute, doctrinal, circular, and unfalsifiable propositions. It is not concerned with the creative interrogation of semiotic experiential analogs in either the person or in the person's social world. As such, it no more pertains to the emancipation of humanity than does fascism or slavery.

The pragmatic consequences of a humane, emancipatory philosophical system, thus, do not imply a grass roots, populist brushfire of radical and revolutionary thought. It is quite difficult to envision the consequences of an American philosopher's critical or radical reflection in this day and age entailing a worker's or "people's" revolution. The experiments in China and Eastern Europe do not easily or effectively translate into a set of social experiments applicable to America, nor are they experiments whose results necessarily demand repeating. The idea of emancipation as the recovery of lost meaning requires a rigorous, individual exploration of a world we have systematically taken for granted, given up on, and suppressed by the programmed development of our institutions. These thoughts and these discoveries do not come easily. More to the point, they certainly are not reducible to a simple political-social creed or programmatic agenda. The academic world has made "thinking" a complex and difficult activity. In the evolution of academic disciplines, academic work has become duly "disciplined" and specialized. The world of academia has, thus, evolved somewhat paradoxically. While it has expanded in scope and access, it has contracted in such a fashion that it has become the only caring and relevant audience for academic speech.

It is difficult to imagine the consequences of thought outside the world of the thinker's activity. If the vocation of philosophy has found its home in the world of professional academia, then one is hard pressed to demand its immediate and direct relevance to activities outside of it. Our hope should not rest, therefore, in self-reflexively refining the metaphysics of thought and interpretation, nor in a self-reflexive institutional dialectic of theory and theorizing. Instead, our concerns should reside in a dialogic, creative, communication pragmatic—in de-professionalizing the dialogue of

thinkers within the institution so that the institution itself can become a source of relevance to the exigencies of the broader social world which envelopes and supports it. If the broader political and social world no longer constitutes a "real" audience for academic speech, it ought therefore not be its object.

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